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RARELY DOES AMERICA'S HUSH-HUSH CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY COMMENT PUBLICLY ON INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS. NOR DOES IT EVER REPLY TO THE MANY CRITICISMS DIRECTED AT IT--THOROUGHLY IN KEEPING WITH ITS MOTTO:

"THE C-I-A NEVER EXPLAINS. . . NEVER ALIBIS."

BUT IN A MOST UNUSUAL DEPARTURE FROM CUSTOM, THE C-I-A IS REASONABLY CERTAIN IT HAS THE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION FOREMOST IN EVERYBODY'S MIND:

"WILL SOVIET RUSSIA EXPLODE THE BERLIN CRISIS INTO WORLD WAR 3?"

THE ANSWER, APPARENTLY, IS A CAUTIOUS "NO."

THE C-I-A DEPUTY DIRECTOR, ROBERT AMORY, SAYS THE RUSSIANS DO NOT HAVE WHAT IS RATIONALLY NEEDED TO CHALLENGE THE U-S AND ITS WESTERN ALLIES THIS SPRING. ALTHOUGH RUSSIA IS NOT READY TO RISK A MAJOR NUCLEAR OVER BERLIN, HE ADDS, SOVIET PREMIER KHRUSHCHEV EXPECTS US--AS AMORY PUTS IT-- "TO CHICKEN OUT."

AT THIS POINT IT MUST BE ADDED THAT IT IS PURE CONJECTURE WHETHER AMORY'S STATEMENT REFLECTS THE C-I-A'S OFFICIAL VIEW AS LAID BEFORE PRESIDENT EISENHOWER AND THE POLICY-SHAPING NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL.

SOVIET LEADERS WERE TOLD 18 MONTHS AGO, AMORY CONTINUES, THAT A 15-YEAR PERIOD OF PEACE IS IMPERATIVE. HE REFLECTS FURTHER THAT RUSSIA'S ECONOMY IS BY NO MEANS MOBILIZED FOR WAR OR FOR PREPARING FOR WAR.

AMORY HEDGES HIS BET ON THE KREMLIN'S HESITANCY TO PULL THE TRIGGER TO THE EXTENT THAT, WHILE NOT READY FOR WAR, IT WILL FIGHT IF CIRCUMSTANCES FORCE IT.

IT IS NOT UNUSUAL FOR THE C-I-A TO PRODUCE RASH ESTIMATES AT ANY TIME OF THE DAY OR NIGHT OF ANY INTERNATIONAL CRISES WHEREVER THEY MAY DEVELOP. REPORTS ON MOVEMENT OF IMPORTANT MILITARY UNITS AND COLDLY LOGICAL APPRAISALS OF WHAT IS LIKELY TO HAPPEN ARE INCLUDED IN THIS CATEGORY.

SUCH ROUND-THE-CLOCK ALERTNESS IS CONFIDENTLY CALCULATED BY THE C-I-A TO PREVENT THE OCCURRENCE OF ANOTHER PEARL HARBOR. FOR INSTANCE, THE AGENCY ACCURATELY PREDICTED THAT THE SOVIET UNION WOULD NOT FIGHT IN 1948 WHEN THE BERLIN AIRLIFT WAS ORDERED BY PRESIDENT TRUMAN.

THERE IS ALSO REASON TO BELIEVE THE C-I-A ESTIMATE THAT RUSSIA MIGHT HAVE GONE TO WAR HAD THE U-S CHOSEN TO STEP INTO THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION IN 1956. IT HAS NEVER SAID SO PUBLICLY, HOWEVER.

FROM TIME TO TIME, CONGRESSIONAL CRITICS HAVE PRODDED THE C-I-A FOR RELYING TOO MUCH ON STATISTICAL DATA GLEANED FROM SOVIET MILITARY, INDUSTRIAL AND FARM JOURNALS, INSTEAD OF PLOTTING BOLDER STEPS SUCH AS PLANTING U-S SPIES INSIDE THE KREMLIN'S WALLS. ALTHOUGH SUCH CRITICISM IS NEVER ANSWERED, C-I-A OFFICIALS STAUNCHLY DEFEND THE NECESSITY OF PAPER WORK IN ADDITION TO THE TRADITIONAL UNDERCOVER SLEUTHING.